

THE RADAR MUSIC

BY STEVE CARTER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CYNDI LONG



AS YOU MIKE IT: Tami Thomsen and John Kirtland of Kirtland Records.

JUST FOR THE RECORD *Dallas label Kirtland Records brings the heart and soul back to music management*

It's a well-known truism that guys in bands love being guys in bands. They revel in that endless merry-go-round of playing their music, piling in and out of wheezing, spare tire-less 15-passenger vans and shoehorning themselves into yet another tiny, sordid rat's nest of a room just off the Interstate. For weeks on end, they survive on fast food, finally limping home three oil changes later in attempt to reassemble the shards of their civilian lives and check whether they've pushed the nearly-infinite patience of wives, girlfriends, day gigs—and reality itself—to the breaking point.

Still, for guys in bands, all of this is to be expected—if they're lucky. The dark corollary of that truism about guys who long to make a living from their music is that almost none of them have the stomach for the actual "business" aspects of the music business, particularly for the omnipotent Suits Behind The Desks. For every epic anecdote of Salvation By Major Label band guys hear and propagate, they'll hear and repeat a thousand-fold more tales of Debacle, Betrayal and Dystopia at the hands of the same Almighty. Every once in a great while, though, an exception comes along to refute the rule in the form of a musician who transforms into a label exec. Witness John Kirtland and his Kirtland Records.

It's been more than 10 years since John Kirtland grabbed the brass ring, drumming for Deep Blue Something, the Denton-based alt-popsters who ruled the charts for a season in 1996 with *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. After migrating from the majors (Interscope Records) to the indies (Aezra

Records), the band essentially called it quits. "I kinda went through that mental space that a lot of artists go through when they've been on a great ride and then it just stops," Kirtland says, explaining the origins of his eponymous label. "After a while, I started building a home studio and really just sort of organically got reinvigorated in it. And then I began to construct some way to be creative again, I knew I didn't want to be the musician on tour, so I just started helping some local bands create records and then this label became a creative vehicle to do something with them."

Did he harbor any misgivings about crossing over to the "other side" of the music biz equation? "I was probably the guy on the tour bus always wondering how things worked and wanting to ask the questions about 'how does this happen?' and asking questions about money—I was *that* guy. So I just sort of took to this," Kirtland says.

The fledgling label quickly put itself on the map by acquiring the catalog of Interscope subsidiary Trauma Records, which included four albums by seminal Brit alt-rockers Bush. In the same horse trade, Kirtland also secured the rights to scores of other titles, numerous soundtracks and won a distribution agreement with Sony RED that assured him major label access to an enviable list of chain accounts, mass merchandisers, internet outlets and independent record stores. Kirtland Records was on the way.

When I ask Kirtland whether he had a mission statement for the label, he excuses himself, rifles through papers in a nearby

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From top: Space Cadet. The Hourly Radio. Mixing at Kirtland's studio.



...CONTINUED desk and, in a play straight out of *Citizen Kane* (or *Jerry McGuire*), returns to the interview with his original manifesto in hand: "Rethinking the Music Business." A no-nonsense, modest proposal built on seven bullet points of core values and beliefs, the document reads like a back-to-basics response to an archetypal major label juggernaut, highlighting respect for the artist, integrity, honesty and the importance of honoring commitments. Another key element on the list is a pledge to remain fiscally prudent, avoiding the legendary budgetary excesses that plague the majors.

"With digital technology, you don't have to spend a million dollars making a record, and you don't have to spend \$300,000 on a video," asserts Tami Thomsen, Kirtland Record's general manager and head of marketing and publicity. "We're working with the same producers that major label artists are working with, but they're working with insane budgets that nobody can recoup on... part of our plan is spending money smarter and wiser." Kirtland continues the thought, "And I'd put our \$25,000 records up against any major release."

Growing the label has been a deliberate, thoughtful process, driven by honest enthusiasm. Kirtland's roster includes constantly touring rockers Burden Brothers, featuring Toadies visionary Vaden Todd Lewis and ex-Horton Heat drumwhacker Taz Bentley; The Hourly Radio, whose debut CD has been greeted by raves on both sides of the Atlantic; Pat McGee Band, major label refugees with a rabid national following; and Space Cadet, whose recently released *Debutante* is attracting legions of fans. Additionally, Kirtland's Sonar Management works with Burden Brothers and the Toadies, the latter on an as-needed basis when the band is sporadically reactivated.

Kirtland maintains, "We're very good at being a partner with the band. We help a lot creatively sometimes, sometimes not, but we're very super-responsive and shoulder to shoulder with all our bands."

"One of the great things about John is that when you're sitting here looking at tour budgets and what it means to be in a van for 30 days, he's

not a guy in a suit and tie who's so far removed from that that he doesn't know," Thomsen says. "He's someone who lived it on a day-to-day basis and went from the highs and lows—the lows being an area band playing for a hundred bucks a night, driving a crap van to the next show for another hundred bucks a night, driving the same crap van to the next show... He gets that."

Thomsen continues, "He's fortunate that he's been that guy in the college band with some buddies who went on to have a No. 1 single and toured the world and made a living and had experiences that all the people we're working with are striving for."

If his band background is the major component to Kirtland's success, enthusiasm is a close second. "We truly are fans of music," Kirtland says. "We love the artists that we work with, and unlike the majors, if we're not having fun, if we don't enjoy the artists that we're working with, we just don't work with them."

Thomsen also remains refreshingly unjaded, a genuine fan to the core. "We're really in this for artist development," she offers. "We're not looking at one single that's going to recoup everything we do. We're in it for the long haul, partnering with our bands."

Reflecting on a triumphant Toadies reunion show that the label put together for a St. Patrick's Day parade, she enthuses, "One of the best things about doing this, is that you do all this paperwork and phone calls and e-mails and just pure business work. But then you go to a rock show on Saturday, and there are kids just screaming their lungs out to a song that you had something to do with, and that's just a magical moment." ■

For more information, including tour schedules, music and video, visit www.kirtlandrecords.com.

